

So... what exactly are the rules of English?

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Dear Mr Gove,

I have seen in our local newspaper, the Eastern Daily Press, that you are keen on testing children in our schools on their knowledge of the rules of English grammar.

I think this is a good idea. Grammar is an important subject. I am rather worried, though, as there are a number of grammatical rules which I am not too sure about.

I would be very grateful if you – I suppose you are very much an expert on the subject? – could explain them to me.

If children are going to be tested about rules, it would be good if adults were in a position to help them and answer any questions they might have.

Here are some of the things I'm worried about.

It is correct grammar to say "a big new red house" but not "a red new big house" or "a new red big house"?

I think I'm right, aren't I? But why is that exactly? What is the rule?

It is also true, I think, that according to the rules of English grammar the negative of "you may" is "you may not", but the negative of "you write" is not "you write not"? Why not? What is the rule?

It seems rather odd. Has it got anything to do with the fact that the interrogative of "you write" is "do you write?" but the



MICHAEL GOVE: Will the education secretary find it harder than he thinks to explain English grammar?

interrogative of "you may" is not "do you may"?"? I would be glad to have the rule explained, please.

It is correct, too, to say "I know him very well" but not to say "I am knowing him very well". Can you please tell me why this is?

And another mysterious thing is: you can say "I turned the light out" and "I turned out the light"; but, while you can say "I asked my friend out", you can't say "I asked out my friend". There must be a rule there. But what is it? How does that work?

I also notice that it is good grammar to

say "I like, you like, we like, they like" but not "she like". Why not? You are supposed to say "she likes".

But what is the point of that "s" there? In Norfolk we don't bother with it, but perhaps we should? Is it important? If so, why is that?

All of your expert opinions will be very gratefully received.

Yours sincerely, Puzzled of Norwich.

■ Peter Trudgill is president of Friends of Norfolk Dialect (FOND)

■ What do you think? Contact Kim Briscoe at kim.briscoe@archant.co.uk